



April 2005

## CDS/ISIS software for libraries

**Doris Matovelo  
Egbert de Smet**

**Doris Matovelo and Egbert de Smet explain why Sokoine National Agricultural Library in Tanzania chose CDS/ISIS software to administer its catalogue and other library operations.**

SNAL is both the library of the Sokoine University of Agriculture in Morogoro, and the national agricultural library of Tanzania. As a national library, SNAL serves the university community and other users of agricultural information throughout the country.



SNAL acquired its first computer in 1989. Between then and 1996, the library's computers were used mainly for word processing, apart from one that was reserved as a terminal where users could access the periodicals database. The rest of the library catalogue was still kept on paper cards. When, in 1997, SNAL decided to computerize its outdated card-based catalogue, it chose CDS/ISIS, a software package developed and distributed by UNESCO.

Since it was introduced in 1985, CDS/ISIS has become one of the most widely used software tools for library information storage and retrieval. Thousands of libraries around the world, especially in developing countries, have used the software to digitize their catalogues, thereby improving access to their holdings. Many of these libraries continue to use CDS/ISIS software to administer their catalogues and to manage other library operations.

### The CDS/ISIS family of software

The versions of CDS/ISIS used today bear often no resemblance to the original DOS-based program developed in the 1980s. The emergence of new operating systems such as Windows and Linux, the rise of the Internet and the open source software movement have all left their marks on the development of CDS/ISIS. A worldwide community of developers (including institutions such as the FAO and Bireme/WHO in Brazil) has produced CDS/ISIS versions for various operating systems and web servers, a wide range of special database management applications and, most recently, a number of open source versions.

This proliferation of CDS/ISIS versions and applications into a broad family of software has changed the role of UNESCO so that it is now the coordinator of many developers and distributors. It has also given rise to the need for a core set of basic 'formats' to guarantee compatibility within the family, in particular the formatting language, which determines how data are validated, sorted, displayed, printed or exported.

With so many new offspring, the CDS/ISIS family has defied the widespread but unfounded idea that the software would become outdated. Another misconception is that CDS/ISIS cannot handle processes other than document information storage and retrieval. In fact, it can deal with most, if not all, library information management tasks.

### Saving money

For SNAL, CDS/ISIS offers a number of advantages. First, the software is free, allowing the library to save on software licence fees. Second, precisely because so many versions of the software are available, including older, DOS-based versions, the library could install it on its old PCs. With the savings on hardware and software, SNAL has been able to invest instead in training its staff in the use and development of the new software.

CDS/ISIS has not only allowed SNAL to continue to use its old computers and invest in human resources, it also enables the library to share its information resources over the Internet. Currently, SNAL's ICT staff, in collaboration with the Department of Information and Library Science of the University of Antwerp, Belgium, are in the process of preparing the library for transition to WEBLIS (Web-based Library Integrated System), a free, fully web-based version of CDS/ISIS developed with the support of the FAO. WEBLIS includes an online public access catalogue (OPAC), which will allow anyone with an Internet connection to access the SNAL catalogue. It will also enable SNAL users to access the catalogues of other African libraries, such as that of Mekelle University in Ethiopia, where the same system is also being introduced.

Global networking For an agricultural library such as SNAL, WEBLIS software has the added advantage that it is used by the wider international agricultural information community, led by the FAO. For users, this means that the interface (i.e. what the user sees on screen) of the SNAL catalogue looks similar to, for instance, that of AGORA, the FAO's scientific and agricultural literature database. Another major advantage for SNAL users is the extensive agriculture-oriented thesaurus built into WEBLIS.

With WEBLIS, the exchange of agricultural information between SNAL and libraries elsewhere in Africa and the rest of the world promises to become a lot easier. We believe that the opportunities provided by WEBLIS for global networking within the agricultural information sector, makes this software the right choice for the future.

*Doris Matovelo ( [mutandzi@yahoo.com](mailto:mutandzi@yahoo.com) ) is head of ICT at Sokoine National Agricultural Library, Tanzania.*

*Egbert de Smet ( [egbert.desmet@ua.ac.be](mailto:egbert.desmet@ua.ac.be)) is academic coordinator and lecturer in the Department of Information and Library Science at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.*

For more information about CDS/ISIS software, visit [the official CDS/ISIS page](#). The SNAL catalogue can be accessed through the [library's website](#).

*28 April 2005*

[http://ictupdate.cta.inten/Feature-Articles/CDS-ISIS-software-for-libraries/\(issue\)/25](http://ictupdate.cta.inten/Feature-Articles/CDS-ISIS-software-for-libraries/(issue)/25)

---

Copyright 2016, CTA. Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (ACP-EU).